

THE THEMES OF SHAVIAN DRAMA: A BRIEF STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief description on the various themes in the works of George Bernard Shaw, one of the greatest Irish playwrights. In his plays, Shaw presented his views on various social evils and other political, religious, economic problems. His plays are basically discussions on the mental reactions of people towards certain problems, and are therefore known as the problem plays. His aim in writing plays was not the story telling or entertaining an audience; rather, he wanted to draw the attention of people to various evils and problems prevailing in society. He considered females as the superior beings who help in the Creative Evolution by giving birth to children and thus support the Life Force as is presented in his play, Man and Superman. He did not have faith in the Christian religion as he felt that the teachings given by the Church were far away from the teachings given by Christ. His religious views have been presented in the play, Saint Joan. In Candida, Shaw presented the concept of New Woman who makes a sensible choice in between her husband and the young poet. In another play, Arms and the Man, he exposes the hollowness of romantic love and undue glorification of war. As his drama had lot of ideas and the conflict of ideas, therefore, it was also known as the Drama of Ideas. As his plays had long dialogues, his characters were called talking characters. Also, due to long introductions within the brackets, his plays were also called pseudo-novels. He wanted to end war, violence and other evils from society and preferred peace and prosperity everywhere. He was also known as the social reformer.

KEYWORDS: *Life Force, Drama of Ideas, Pseudo-Novel, Problem Plays, New Woman*

INTRODUCTION

George Bernard Shaw, an Irish writer, was born in Dublin in the year 1856. Though the family of Shaw had been small landowners in Ireland, they claimed to have an ancient Scottish origin. As a boy, Shaw loved to visit the Irish National Gallery and gradually, he gained a sound knowledge of some of the great composers of opera. He studied Economics and Socialism and read books like Marx's *Das Capital*. He also became a member of the Fabian Society, which further socialised him. He was influenced by the works of William Archer and Ibsen. Samuel Butler and Nietzsche's philosophy also influenced him. He was not a successful novelist but established himself completely as a dramatist with the publication of *Man and Superman* in 1903. A few of Shaw's important plays were *Widower's Houses*, *Arms and the Man*, *Candida*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Man and Superman*, *Major Barbara*, *Getting Married*, *Pygmalion*, *Saint Joan*, etc. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in the year 1925.

Shaw was basically a social reformer and a propagandist of intellectual enlightenment, whose aim was to shake the beliefs of people through his powerful and strong ideas. He worked tirelessly to establish social justice and

righteousness. He criticised the social evils that were practiced and prevalent in society such as poverty, widowhood, prostitution, treatment of saints and geniuses by mankind, undue glorification of war and romantic love and so on. Unlike the Romantics, the playwright has always given priority to ideas rather than emotions. He wanted to make an impact in the minds of the audience through his novel and strong ideas and different viewpoints in his plays. Because of strong and powerful ideas in his drama, it is known as the 'drama of ideas'. He had created his own "theatre of ideas". Therefore, in his plays, we find conflict of ideas rather than conflict of wills. A lot of ideas float in his plays; so, there is very little action on stage. The exchange of ideas through the long speeches and dialogues between the characters maintain the interest of the audience. It is due to the delivery of long speeches in the play, that the characters are called the talking characters. And because the characters are involved in delivering long dialogues, they perform minimum action in the play and are therefore also called inactive characters.

Shaw's plays are also known as the "problem plays" because in his plays, he had dealt with the important social problem or burning issues and presented his views and opinions on that. For example, he dealt with the problem of London slum in the *Widowers' Houses*, social evil of prostitution in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, treatment of saints who raise their voice against religious authorities and so on. No other contemporary British writer took interest in making the existing social, political or religious problems the subject of their writings. His plays discussed the mental reactions to a given problem in the contemporary society. The important point that needs to be mentioned over here is that though he pondered over and took up both the aspects of a problem, he himself never gave any kind of solution to that problem. He wanted the audience to ponder over the problem, comprehend and perceive it and then come out with their own solutions. It is indeed imperative to first comprehend a problem in order to find out a genuine solution to it. Interestingly, this was also a method that could never give rise to any kind of controversy. Shaw was a critic but his criticism was never harsh. Whatever he disliked, he criticised it in a pleasant and mild manner so that no one could feel offended or hurt. It is therefore believed that Shaw did not have many enemies. The playwright possesses commendable talent of creative artistry as well as the art of preaching as is apparent in his plays.

Shaw's plays are also called pseudo-novels because of long introductions about the characters and background within the brackets. Narrating a story or creating a character was never his inclination or intention in his plays. Rather, his motive was to convince the nation according to his opinions. His plays basically have long discussions on some important social, religious or economic problems. Therefore, long prefaces were attached to the plays. Just like a novelist, here the playwright himself gives lot of information about the scenes, characters and their emotional status within the brackets, therefore his plays are also called pseudo novels. As there is a basic difference between a novel and a play because in a novel, the novelist can voice himself or present his views anytime whenever he feels its importance but, in case of a play, the playwright can never come up on stage and speak directly to the audience. So, whenever he wants to communicate with the audience he does this with the help of the dialogues delivered by the characters. And so, for this reason, Shaw makes a character his mouthpiece to present his views. For example, in *Arms and the Man*, Bluntschli is the mouthpiece; John Tanner is the mouthpiece of Shaw's philosophy in *Man and Superman*, Eugene Marchbanks in *Candida* and so on.

Shaw's themes are usually based on his views on social, cultural, political, religious, moral, economic aspects of our lives. He advocated the rights of women and worked on women's equality on economic and social basis. Shaw's theory of Life Force and Creative Evolution became very popular. It was discussed elaborately for the first time in his play *Man and Superman*. This play was staged for the first time in the year 1903. The playwright had described this play as a

“Comedy and Philosophy”. The purpose of Shaw’s Life Force was to evolve into better and higher forms. Shaw himself defines Life Force as vitality with a direction. According to Shaw’s conception, the initial form of life was female and the Life Force worked through woman who created man to carry or evolve life into higher forms. Let us see in the Act III of the play, *Man and Superman*, where in the Hell scene, Don Juan tells Ann, the heroine of the play, that for a woman, a man is only a means of begetting children and extending his help to rear them: “Sexually, Woman is Nature’s contrivance for perpetuating its highest achievement. Sexually, Man is Woman’s contrivance for fulfilling Nature’s behest in the most economical way. She knows by instinct that far back in the evolutionary process she invented him, differentiated him and created him in order to produce something better than the single sexed- process can produce. Whilst he fulfils the purpose for which she made him, he is welcome to his dreams, his follies, his ideals, his heroism, provided that the keystone of them all is the worship of woman, of motherhood, of the family, of the hearth.” Actually, the essence of Shaw’s philosophy is presented through the long speeches of Don Juan in the Hell scene of the play, *Man and Superman*.

For Shaw, poverty was an evil in society that created hurdles in the way of the Life Force. He was sceptical about capitalism because it hampered the activities of Life Force. He believed in the economic equality because it helped in the evolutionary function of Life Force. Equality of income also provides equal opportunities to all. Poverty is the theme of some of his plays like *Widower’s Houses*, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, *Major Barbara*, etc. *Widower’s Houses* is a comedy with serious purpose as there is exposure of serious issues like economic problems, landlordism, matrimonial issues, etc. Underpayment to women in the industrial world leads them to the profession as presented in *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*. In the play, *Major Barbara*, Shaw has presented how the power of money exploits the poor. Here, Shaw has emphasised on the criminal properties of poverty. He said that poverty is the mother of all crimes. The play projects how even the endeavours of the noble people fail under the brutal power of money in the capitalist world.

Shaw had valued and emphasised on the maternal aspect of woman because she becomes mother of children and thus contributes in the Creative Evolution theory of Life Force. Shaw wanted social justice and economic equality for women. He vividly presents the problems and plights of women stuck in difficult situation in order to draw the attention of the audience. In the play, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, the playwright had presented the plight of a woman who was driven towards prostitution due to poverty and later on, after becoming a mother, she ran a brothel. Her daughter does not know about her mother’s profession till the end and when she came to know about it, she froze and became contemptuous of her mother’s profession which was a very obvious reaction of any daughter. The society blames an individual for carrying out such trades but indeed the society itself should be held responsible. The play projects the problem of an organised prostitution in society and also presents the poignant plight of the relationship of mother and daughter who were forced into this kind of situation. In the play *Candida*, Shaw presents the dilemma of the heroine, Candida, to choose between her husband and their young friend, a romantic poet, who turns out to be her lover. Shaw says that women are just like men, so they should be given equal treatment though he is against romantic adoration of them and he had discussed it in the Preface of the play, *Man and Superman*. AC Ward says in his Introduction to *Candida*, “Shaw was among the limited number of men who supported the principle of the equality of the sexes, and most of his heroines have the characteristics of the New Woman: they are independent in spirit, self-confident, clear headed, morally courageous, and emotionally well controlled”.

It seems that Shaw does not have much faith in the institution of marriage as he had certain objections to it. The institution of marriage is further supported by the institution of family. As long as this social institution of marriage supports the process of procreation, it contributes in the Life Force but, when the self-centred interest of the people within

this institution in form of husband and wife get diverted towards acquisition of wealth and property rather than procreation, it create obstacles in the evolution of Life Force. Moreover, within the institution of marriage, the husband and wife curb the freedom, liberty and independence of each other and have to live like slaves of each other; this in turn affects and hampers the growth of them as individuals. It also restricts the free and frank discussions of truth and topics like sex which is considered sacred because it is an indispensable part of procreation. This in turn has a negative effect on the civilisation. On the other hand, there is a general perception that in a family, it is the husband who provides livelihood, security, comfort, care and honour to the family but, in reality, it is the woman who takes care of the family and provides comfort. This is well presented in *Candida* where the heroine Candida, Shaw's new woman, takes good care of her family and house and makes her husband dependent on her. As AC Ward puts it in *Candida*, "she is basically a practical minded woman. Marchbanks' poetry does not hold her attention. It is only a passing fancy that she soon tires of. She chooses the stability of a home and family and life with Morel. In the final scene of the play, she is entirely in charge, allowing Morell and Marchbanks to 'expose' themselves and then choosing between the two".

Shaw attacks the machinery of law and justice because it is influenced by the strong and rich capitalists. In *Heartbreak House*, he presents the picture of the capitalist society where the powerful politicians and lawmakers control the system and corrupt it. In his play, *Androcles and the Lion*, he presents that how sometimes even religious persecution gets influenced by political powers and personal interests. This is how he discusses the problem of corruption in different areas and draws the attention of the audience towards it. As a boy, Shaw had abandoned his religion because he thought that whatever was taught by the Church was far away from the teachings of Christ. In the play, *Saint Joan*, the playwright had presented how sometimes the saints and geniuses are treated badly by people either due to their ignorance or their selfish interests. In the play, the fundamental beliefs related to religion are challenged by the dramatist and put to judgment. Saint Joan stood against the judgment of Church and resisted against the authority, sacrificed her life and became a martyr.

Shaw was against war and violence. He also expressed his opinions against undue glorification of war and also, the romantic love. He had exposed the hollowness of romantic notions of love and glorification of war in the play, *Arms and the Man*. The play is basically a satire on the above two issues where the playwright had presented the contrast between idealism and realism through long discussions. Shaw had himself called his play, *Arms and the Man*, an anti-romantic comedy and AC Ward had addressed it as a classic of English drama. In the play, the discussions between the heroine, Raina and Bluntschli are witty and interesting and so it successfully captures the interest of the audience. Through Bluntschli, the dramatist expressed his own anti romantic views about war and the profession of soldiering.

Shaw was also known as a social reformer because he wanted to bring a positive change in society and he left no stone unturned in the accomplishment of this desire. He was known for his problem plays, drama of ideas and talking characters. Shaw basically never wanted to be a dramatist rather, his motive was to express his opinions and views and he did this through the characters that were his mouthpieces. Shaw reached his fame with the publication of *Saint Joan* in 1923 though he regarded his play, *Back to Methuselah* (1922) as his magnum opus. Shaw preferred to write on the plots that were familiar to the audience. In the words of AC Ward, as he puts it in his Introduction to *Candida*, Shaw "hoped by that means to encourage men and women to break away from worn out conventions and from opinions and ideas which they had not thought out for themselves, but had taken over unthinkingly from their elders, or had simply accepted without

question as a matter of social custom". George Bernard Shaw was a genius who died in 1950 creating a vacuum in the world of the modern dramatists.

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